

We need more from Bush on environment

President Bush travels to Maine today, Earth Day, to visit an ecosystems research center in York County and to deliver a speech about the environment.

Sen. Olympia J. Snowe declared herself "thrilled" by the president's visit, saying it honors Maine's well-established commitment to a clean environment.

Brownie Carson, head of the Natural Resources Council of Maine, expressed the hope that the president's speech might contain "some good news about his administration's intent to protect the environment."

We share that hope, although given the rather dismal record of the White House in that regard it does not seem likely.

Snowe, along with the rest of the Maine congressional delegation — fellow Republican Sen. Susan M. Collins and Democratic Reps. Thomas H. Allen and Michael H. Michaud — have long been at odds with the Bush administration over many of its environmental policies.

Regardless of partisan affiliation, the Maine delegation has been unanimous in its opposition to Bush-backed proposals to protect manufacturers of the gasoline additive MTBE from lawsuits, to open Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, to relax carbon dioxide emissions controls and to slow the pace of mercury pollution by coal-fired power plants.

More recently, the delegation has opposed a Defense Department proposal to exempt military installations from environmental regulations. Collins, a member of the Armed Services Committee, was particularly critical of this plan, saying, "It concerns me that communities in Maine and across the nation that neighbor defense installations could be put at risk if the military is not required to answer to environmental laws."

Even when the administration assumes a get-tough posture with respect to environmental regulation, it falls short on the accountability side of the ledger. For instance, the Environmental Protection Agency recently cited 31 states for noncompliance with federal standards for allowable

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ozone levels. More than 100 communities in Maine, primarily along the coast, made the list.

The EPA has demanded that the affected states submit a clear plan for reducing ozone or face the loss of federal transportation funds.

Maine actually has such a plan and has been promoting it for years without success among federal regulators in the executive branch, in the halls of Congress and in the courts. It is this: Enforce existing laws calling for the reduction of ozone-producing toxins pouring into the Northeast from Midwestern power plants that pollute our air and water, poison our fish, threaten the health of our trees and inflict serious respiratory problems upon our residents, young and old.

In short, the president has much to answer for in any speech about the environment delivered in this state. Maine is, after all, the home of the late Sen. Edmund S. Muskie, author of landmark federal clean-water and clean-air legislation more than three decades ago. Some provisions of those laws, by the way, are being studiously ignored or deliberately weakened by the Bush administration.

Like the NRC's Carson, we would be delighted to get some "good news" from the president on Earth Day 2004 about any significant change in the direction of his approach to environmental protection.

At this point, though, we are not holding our breath.